

Pragmatism and Critical Thinking: The Tragedy of Achebe's *Okonkwo* and *Ezeulu*

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Abstract

Literature is very important in remolding a society. Modern civilized societies focus on literature in order to attain a high quality of life. Philosophical pragmatism and fictional forms are methods of inquiry and modes of understanding that serve as instruments that accord significant place to the imaginations. Philosophy, analytical thinking and problem solving are vitally important in the understanding and development of human persons. Philosophical questioning and critical thinking set one onto the path of true understanding that leads into a meaningful personal and social change. A literary analysis of the tragic flaws of the selected fictional characters is based on the framework of John Dewey's brand of pragmatism. The tragedy of their decisions is examined as consequences of the failure to apply critical thinking in their major decisions.

Key Words: Philosophy, Pragmatism, Critical Thinking, Instrumentalism, Tragedy

Introduction

Pragmatism serves as an intellectual instrument that accords significant place to the imaginative. The tragedy of the individuals in the texts narratives sets out the pace for the determination of their characters. The error of the tragic character in their decisions and actions are necessary in shaping the tone of the society. It is however "tragedy alone that brings people out of their own petty desires and into awareness of other humans' suffering. Tragedy occurs in human lives so that we will learn to reach out and comfort others" (C. S. Lewis Online).

Critical thinking and problem solving are requisite philosophical instruments in a complex modern democracy. Hence, E. R. Lai describes the “Critical thinker as an ideal type, focusing on what people are capable of doing under the best of circumstances” (E.R. Lai 5). It requires goodwill and calculated consciousness to act in a way that promotes common good in particular circumstances.

Hence, whether a society is civilized or not is determined by the kind of individuals that live in it. The traditional Igbo Society has a well structured social order that elevates communal thinking against individual ego. An ideal critical thinker is seen as “as someone who is inquisitive in nature, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded, has a desire to be well-informed, understands diverse viewpoints, and is willing to both suspend judgment and to consider other perspectives”(Lai 5). Pragmatism and critical thinking are vitally important today in the development of human persons. Literary characters to be studied here are seen as tragic characters who according to Aristotle’s *Poetics* “determine men’s qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse” (12). These fictional characters serve as symbols and metaphors for the desired representations of human individuals for change. *Okonkwo*, of *Things Fall Apart* and *Ezeulu* of *Arrow of God* are examined in their flaws as coming from the failure to apply critical thinking in the major decisions and practical actions they undertake. This paper makes a literary analysis of the select characters in the novels of Achebe on the standpoint of John Dewey’s brand of Pragmatism and Critical Thinking. It specifically examines the errors in decision and actions of the characters that are seen as tragic. The paper suggests critical thinking as a practical matter-of-fact way of approach and assessing situations.

Conceptual Issues

Pragmatism as a movement in philosophy was founded for the purpose of ‘mediating between two divergent tendencies in nineteenth-century thought... the drift of this tradition was in the direction of looking at the world and man as parts of a mechanical or biological process in which the mind occupied the status either of observer or reflector of these natural physical

processes' (Stump 396). Thus it presents an expansive space about man's activities as a member of a society. This is achieved through a combination of the most significant features of the empiricism and utilitarianism of the Darwinian theory of evolution; the rationalistic and idealistic norms of Rene Descartes, the critical idealism of Kant; the absolute realism of Hegel and the romantic and revised idealism of the late 19th century new-Hegelians. Thus it becomes a most practical theory about man in his daily life. Pragmatism therefore becomes popular with the notion that "it exalts the 'practical' man who disdains theoretical thought and prefers to 'get things done'. The pragmatist philosophers saw little value in modes of thinking that did not somehow make a difference in daily life" (Stumpf 397). Hence the idea reflects how man thinks and how thought works in action.

John Dewey's major expression of pragmatism is in the social realm with influence on education, democracy, ethics, religion and art. Dewey's theory of *instrumentalism* arises as an emphasis to thinking as always instrumental in solving problems, expressing that, "instrumentalism differs from empiricism and rationalism. Whereas the latter two theories of knowledge separate thinking and doing, instrumentalism holds that reflective thought is always involved in transforming a practical situation" (Stumpf 410). It is believed that there must be a close connection between thinking and doing in resolving a critical situation. None, therefore, is done in isolation with the other. Another conception of pragmatism is postulated by Eugene Halton who observes that James and Dewey are the Chief Public Spokesmen for pragmatism, saying that "There were powerful manifestations of the modernist impulse in the early twentieth century. Their ardent optimism, pluralism, and situationalism showed new ways of reconceived minds as vitally continuous with nature, experience and conduct" (7). Pragmatism proposes that we know things from several perspectives as aspects of human experience. Man usually has a variety of choices to make in a given situation.

The relationship between literature as a form of artistic understanding and pragmatism as a form of philosophical inquiry confirms the fact that each accords imagination as an instrument both of knowing and making. Danielsen Elin adds that the consequences of pragmatism on literary studies “implies a shift in focus from ontological to practical questions and experience, and how this implies a shift from asking what literature is to what it does” (Online). The quest therefore is the application of the imaginative or thoughts into action. Scholars and researchers have severally investigated issues and make literary analysis on the need for the knowledge of philosophy in tackling issues on civilization and its effects on individuals and their communities. *The American Heritage Dictionary* in a write up “Literary Concept of Pragmatism” describes “pragmatism as a movement consisting of varying but associated theories originally developed by Charles Peirce and William James and distinguished by the doctrine that the meaning of an idea or proposition lies in its observable practical consequences” (Online). This involves a practical matter of fact way of approaching or assessing situations or of solving problems.

In an essay “Is There a Pragmatic Approach to Literature?”, Giles Gunn explains the nature of the linkage between art and philosophy when he argues that “the purpose of art and he could have added, of pragmatic reflection as well, is to contrast actual conditions and their probable consequences with the purely probable outcomes of experiences that are merely potential” (41). Gunn posits that literary and philosophical forms serve both functions of once taking us out of ourselves to experience what is strange and also return us to the center of an experience where we so often recover a sense of the strangeness and foreignness that is already within it. Dewey had already stated as early as 1920 that “philosophy needs to relinquish the search for an absolute and immutable reality and replace it with the efforts to enhance all experience by exploring its possibilities for richer and more extensive fulfillment” (Gunn 42). Whereas, the essay, “Philosophy, Public Service and Peace in the Society” discussing what contributes to a peaceful society highlights the need for the knowledge of philosophy in public service. He reiterates the fact that “a public servant

like a philosopher should be a man or woman of reason rather than emotion” (Benjamin Ewelu 2). This assertion underscores the need for deep philosophical and critical thinking.

It is observed that works of art arouse and stimulate feelings as William Butler Yeats once said “works of art do their thinking in the mire and fury of human veins” (Gunn 45). He further explains that, “works of arts serve practical cognitive needs through narratives, stories and tales by providing opportunities to imagine the inconceivable, think the unthinkable, say the unsayable, hear the unhearable, feel the unfeeling. At the same time they also help us to recover parts of our experience that we would otherwise have lost” (45). Pragmatic approach to literature can be illuminating by showing the purposes of literary texts and revealing how such texts imaginatively work. This idea concurs with Marcel Proust’s belief that ‘certain truth can only be examined and expressed in the form of Stories” (Gunn 45). These truths about human actions are to be explicated in the fictional narratives and textual situations and contexts which present new reasons to attend to them and take them seriously. The crux of this paper from the pragmatic point of view is to reveal what difference it will make to accept the pragmatic solution of critical thinking to the problem of a society as against all other lines of actions including scientific, rationalistic, idealistic, moral, ethical analysis as had been proffered by scholars. The pragmatics of critical thinking is applied in the analysis of the tragic decisions and actions taken by the individual protagonists in the novels selected novels of Chinua Achebe.

Tragic Flaws in the Characters

The tragedy of these individuals reflects in the major decisions they take that result to a flaw in their characters. Each of the two characters under reference *Okonkwo* and *Ezeulu* in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* respectively has made critical decisions that become the bases to their downfall. These can be seen looking at the plot analysis of the texts. However:

It is observed that social and political institutions of the traditional society have perfected the art of exacting conformity from the individual and discouraging deviations and subversions of the common will. The careers of important characters like Okonkwo or Ezeulu, illustrate the primacy of the society over the individual. All of them are shown to be powerful in their communities. The primacy of the latter is soon established. In the cases of Okonkwo and Ezeulu. It is shown that the individual cannot find fulfillment outside the protective wing of his community. (Owen Mordaunt 161).

Things Fall Apart presents Okonkwo as a tragic hero who struggles against internal and external forces and who eventually meets a tragic end. The plot line of Okonkwo's struggle and downfall reveals not only his complex character but also the strong social fabric of the *Umuofia* people. Among some major decisions and actions taken by Okonkwo was the desecration of the holy week of peace caused by his fiery anger. Thus, it is known in Umuofia that "Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children" (*Things Fall Apart* 9). His high handedness makes him to decide to beat his youngest wife on a week of peace ignoring the plea from his first two wives. It is also known that "Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess" (21). In his anger he had forgotten that it was the week of peace and beats his youngest wife for not cooking his afternoon meal as she has gone to plait her hair at her friend's house and did not return early enough. This act counts against Okonkwo and paves way to his impending tragedy. Similar incident of flawed decision by Okonkwo to wife beating is recorded when his second wife "Ekwefi is thoroughly beaten by him for cutting a few banana leaves to wrap some food. Still smarting from her mistreatment, Ekwefi jeers at Okonkwo's amateurish handling of an old rusty gun, Okonkwo promptly takes an aim and narrowly misses shooting her to death, thereby nearly desecrating the new yam festival" (C.Anyoku 15). Obviously, anger and fear present as Okonkwo's nightmare and veritable factors of flawed character.

Another major error of judgement and action committed by Okonkwo is in his involvement in the killing of *Ikemefuna*. Not only that he is involved in the arrangement as a fulfillment of the desire of the oracle that Ikemefuna would be sacrificed to the gods as an appeasement after he had lived as a son with Okonkwo. He was warned before hand by *Ogbuefi Ezeudu* who visits him and tells him, “Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you father” (*Things Fall Apart* 40). Unfortunately, in spite of this warning, as Ikemefuna runs to Okonkwo for protection from the blow of the first man, dazed with fear, he drew his machete and cut him down. He is afraid of being thought weak. In condemning Okonkwos act of homicide, Anyoku states that:

Insofar as Okonkwo stands in loco parentis to Ikemefuna for a period of three years, the boy automatically becomes his ‘son’ – or adopted son and he, the surrogate paterfamilias. The parental obligations sanctioned by tradition ought to have been discharged by Okonkwo towards his charge but he fails to do this. Also, his homicide is considered by the novel’s narrator to be “an act against nature”, that is to say, it violates cosmic laws and spiritual principles which undergird human social existence”. (15).

Fear manifests as a Okonkwo’s flaw in character. He decides not to be like his father who is seen as a coward and could not bear the sight of blood.

Perhaps, the final action that sees Okonkwo down is the killing of the white man’s head messenger who is sent to come and stop the Umuofia clan meeting. This he did out of anger and hate for the previous humiliation he and some elders had suffered at the hands of the clerk. The moment was aptly captured:

In a flash, Okonkwo drew his machete. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow but it was useless. Okonkwo’s machete descended once and the man’s head lay beside his uniformed body. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia

would not go to war because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken in tumult instead of action. He wiped his machete on the sand and went away. (*Things Fall Apart* 145).

Okonkwo again presents an error in decision devoid of tact and critical thinking. Okonkwo is meant to bear the consequences of his action as no one from the community comes to his rescue. This confirms the fact that traditional African society abhors deviation and subversion in its citizens. This assertion however, does not augur well with Kanu's proposition adducing therefore that the action of Umuofia in deserting Okonkwo at this point:

Negates the principles of African ethics and the place of community in African ontology and philosophy which defines a person in reference to his kinship... The community has a responsibility in rooting out evil and more so, the responsibility in helping the person concerned. This is based on the African proverb that says 'a kinsman who strays into evil must first be saved from it by all, and then afterwards questioned on why and how he dared stray into it to start with. (171).

This is not to be the case here, Okonkwo is left to his fate. As he sees that his people have deserted him and drawn by fear of a second humiliation by the Whiteman he committed suicide by hanging himself on a tree. In all these situations, Okonkwo would have acted differently if he assessed his decisions and actions critically.

Arrow of God presents *Ezeulu*, the Chief Priest of *Ulu*, the chief deity of *Umuaro* and his desires to maintain perpetual authority over his kinsmen. He, like his counterpart, Okonkwo exhibits high handedness in dealing with the people such that any thought which seeks to undermine his authority receives immediate thrashing. The tragedy of his character hence "stems from the fact that what links tragedy is the presentation of a protagonist whose powerful wish to achieve some goals seems to inevitably come up

against limits which he is powerless” (Alex Preminger and T.V.F Brogan 1299). The limit in Ezeulu’s case is self-created. This reflects in the major decisions he takes which fault his character as a leader and cause his downfall. These decisions and actions come from the underlying fear of losing his authority as the chief priest of Ulu. According to Owen .G Mordaunt, “Ezeulu refuses in his mind to be a mere puppet leader, he must execute his duties according to the dictates of his position. He has a conflict which he must deal with. This is why later in the text, he loses equanimity, he is no longer contented to see himself as merely a watchman” (56). In the light of this conflict in his mind, he makes rash decisions which are laden with repercussions.

In one of such instances, Ezeulu is warned by his friend *Akuebue* against sending his son *Oduche* to the White missionary. But Ezeulu has sealed a pact with the White Missionary promising to send one of his sons, for fear of the future. He later persuaded *Oduche* to join the church telling him that:

The world is changing. I do not like it. But I am like the bird *Eneke-nti-oba* when his friends asked him why he was always on the wing he replied. ‘Men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly with-out perching’. I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share world is like a masking dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. (*Arrow of God* 45-6).

This particular decision of Ezeulu is unwise and anathema to his position as the cultural and spiritual head of a community deity. It is a decision taken in error, the consequence of which adds to his flaws. Commenting on this action of Ezeulu, A. N. Akwanya in “Function, Deliberative Action, and Struggle in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* writes that “ he does not want to be one of those ‘saying *had we known* tomorrow’, but he wants his share of that tomorrow to be brought home to him. He does not want to shift grounds towards it... He will greatly suffer because of decisions which are *indeliberate*, but necessary, at least in his own perception, but his

deliberative actions will play a catalytic role” (*Okike* 52, 86). A critical reasoning on this decision would save him the dilemma and eventual repercussion of this deliberative action. Secondly, Ezeulu testifies against his people on the ownership of the disputed land between Umuaro and Okperi. This he makes against the wish of his people. Even though his decision to stand by the truth is applauded by Julia Udofia “as symbol of the people’s religious and spiritual values, he is the epitome of integrity who tells the truth at all times no matter how damaging it is to his community”(Okike 52, 108). Regrettably, the error in this decision is highlighted by the damaging effect on the community because of lack of critical thinking.

Among other of Ezeulu’s decisions and actions which lack pragmatic and critical approach is his refusal to eat the yam and count the moon which will herald the announcing of the harvest of the new yam festival. Ezeulu because of his desire to revenge against his people for deserting him during his detention by the Whiteman, nurses deep anger and remains obstinate. In spite of different delegations of elders of Umuaro who come to plead and pledge to bear the responsibility of the outcome from *Ulu* he remains resolute in decision and anger. Ezeulu alleges in defense that “Ulu did say that two new moons came and there was no one to break kola nut to him and Umuaro were silent” (*Arrow of God* 208). Their plea does not get him to change his mind. Ezeulu remains undaunted in his resolve asserting his authority. The consequence of it is that “Ezeulu has become a public enemy in the eyes of all and, and as was to be expected, his entire family shared in his guilt. His children came up against it on their way to the stream and his wives suffered hostility in the market” (211), yet he remains adamant. He certainly allows himself to be used as a whip against his people by the gods. He instead forgets his foremost duty to his people as observed by Amadihe Ezeugu that “blinded by his irascible persecution mania, a sort of *Agwu*, Ezeulu forgets that the responsibility of his priesthood is to go ahead and confront danger before it reaches his people as he demonstrates annually during each festival of the pumpkin leaves when he re-enacts the myths of the First Coming of Ulu in Umuaro” (*Okike* 52 250). Merely carrying out

his duty to the people would be a reasonable thing to do to avert the wrath of the people and eventually the gods. It is unmistakable that the individual characters Okonkwo and Ezeulu have fear for something which is the underlying motivation for their error in judgements and decisions exhibited in their behavioural manifestations. They are tragic characters in the sense that their actions are mainly governed by self-centredness and pride. They desire one thing or the other against the collective interest of the people around them.

Conclusion

The fact remains that there is a close connection between thinking and doing. Pragmatic approach to literature can be illuminating by revealing how texts work imaginatively. This concurs with Marcel Proust's idea that "certain truths can only be examined and expressed in the form of stories" (Giles Gunn 45). Narratives, such as we have here and other forms of art help us to construct textual situations or contexts that will help us understand practical human experiences. The implication of the different traits outlined by the major decisions of the characters examined underscores the fact that their actions are based on personal interests. Each has something, a desire he wishes to fulfill. By being rational and idealizing, the individuals err in judgement. Pragmatism promotes the pursuit of practicality over-aesthetic qualities, and a concentration on facts rather than emotion or ideas.

These individual characters act in a milieu of communal living. The question is what is the implication for purposely breaking the law of the land or society? We observe that the individuals tried to obey the laws of the communities but are faced with the conflict of personal pride and external social laws. Okonkwo, whose sense of pride and dignity continues until the end, chooses to live and die on his own terms rather than submit to the Whiteman who likely will get him arrested. Likewise, Ezeulu, refuses to compromise his personal decision and resolution regardless of the tension created by his insistence. Society is passing through a lot of similar challenges. The human factor is likely to bring the desired change by

submitting to the calls and admonitions that come their way regularly as solutions to making it better.

The philosophy of pragmatism and critical thinking is viewed as a paradigm shift from the usual analytical, scientific, rationalistic and idealistic approach to the problems of our society. Pragmatism proffers that individuals should apply critical thinking in assessing decisions our actions especially as it concerns the common good and benefits of our society. Also social, traditional and political institutions should discourage deviations and subversions of the common will by individuals by emphasizing the primacy of the group over the individuals.

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